

# Art, Money and the CIA

The Washington Post \_\_\_\_\_  
The New York Times \_\_\_\_\_  
The Washington Times \_\_\_\_\_  
The Wall Street Journal \_\_\_\_\_  
The Christian Science Monitor \_\_\_\_\_  
New York Daily News \_\_\_\_\_  
USA Today \_\_\_\_\_  
The Chicago Tribune \_\_\_\_\_  
*PHIL. INQUIRER - CI*  
Date *30 JUNE 88*

By Dick Polman  
Inquirer Staff Writer

**N**EW YORK — Matt Mullican recently spent a week fighting his conscience. He lost. Worse than that, he lost big. His conscience took him to the cleaners. His conscience cost him nearly a quarter of a million bucks.

But hey, it's only money. He's an artist, after all. He has *principles*. He did his bit as a struggling bohemian, drawing posters for a bookseller, doing some part-time trucking. And now he has an airy loft in Little Italy. He has made a living off his art since 1980. At 36, he has art critics crowing about his flags and banners and murals — on his terms.

So his wallet wasn't fat, but his soul was

clean. Then one spring day, the phone rang. The spooks were looking for a few good men.

Marilyn Farley was calling. She worked for the General Services Administration, the federal agency that acts as landlord for government buildings. More to the point, she worked for the GSA's art-in-architecture department. The GSA was working on a new federal project, a big one, and two artists were being tapped to provide some aesthetic polish. The artists would be splitting \$450,000.

"Congratulations," she

told Mullican: "You've been awarded one of the commissions. We can't wait for you to work with us. . . ."

He was astounded. He did some fast math, and realized that this commission would be worth around \$225,000 — nearly 10 times his personal best of \$25,000. Five months earlier, members of a GSA search committee had asked his agent to send some work samples, and he hadn't paid much attention. But now he was psyched. Artists *killed* for GSA projects. Maybe it was a post office. He always wanted to do a post office. . . .

But Farley was still talking: "And the site is the new headquarters for the Central Intelligence Agency."

His first reaction was not very articulate. He wanted to be courteous. He wanted to be nice. So what he said was, "Uhhhhhhhhhh."

"How do you feel?" Farley said.

"Well, it doesn't look good. I may not be able to participate."

Farley urged him to talk it over with his peers, so he did. He held back for a week. He spent a week wrestling with the big questions about art and influence, art and

power, commerce and conscience. It would be an odd matchup, for sure — Cold War bureaucrats joining forces with a guy who, as a performance artist, once slapped a cadaver's face and found "a sort of purity in the fact of deadness."

The details are still secret, but what's known is that the CIA is expanding its headquarters in northern Virginia, with new offices covering one million square feet. The CIA agreed to commission art for the new digs — one artist to adorn the new lobby, one to beautify the grounds outside. This was an aesthetic leap for the CIA. In the past, its idea of art was to deck the walls with painted renderings of its fearless leaders. Not this time. The agency turned to the GSA, which formed a search committee with help from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The CIA gave its marching orders to the jurors: "This art should reflect life in all its positive aspects (e.g. truth, justice, courage, liberty, etc.). It should engender feelings of well-being, hope, promise and such. It should not produce or reflect negative attitudes, political expressions or feelings of futility. . . . It should be forceful in style and manner."

**CONTINUED**

Needless to say, this project seemed worrisome from the start, a combustible blend of art and politics. (Although spies have long been known as aesthetes; James Angleton, who ran the CIA's counterintelligence division for years, spent his leisure hours writing poetry and raising orchids.) "We knew it might be difficult to find artists," says juror Jack Cowart, a curator at the National Gallery of Art. "But this is an opportunity to treat the people who work there as citizens. We thought it could open up horizons on both sides."

"I even thought twice about joining the panel," says juror Ned Rifkin, chief curator of the Hirshhorn Museum. "I wouldn't have been surprised if every artist turned this down. But the hope is that good art can sensitize people. These people have a right to good art. And good artists are strong enough to hold their ground, in terms of integrity."

Rifkin tried some of these arguments on Matt Mullican. Mullican was not in good shape at the time. More than 200,000 greenbacks were threatening to grow wings and take flight, and he seemed powerless to stop them. Rifkin told him that somebody would be filling the lobby with art, that it might as well be him, that maybe the artist could do something to "influence the context" somehow.

Mullican's wife, Valerie Smith, made similar points. Remember, too, that he had been chosen from among hundreds; 300 had volunteered themselves in autumn last year when a notice ran in the Washington Post. A huge, bare lobby was awaiting his special touch, perhaps some bold flag-and-banner number. "You have an opportunity to influence people, and you should do it!" his wife said. "Jump in that fire!"

But he approached the issue just as an artist would — which is to say, impressionistically. "It's like, when I think CIA, I think guns," he says. "I hate guns. Whenever I see a gun, I freak out. I saw a robbery take place once, in Chinatown. I was walking

down the street, and these two guys ran out of a jewelry store, and I saw the gun close up. On TV, a gun is atmospheric and ethereal. But in reality they're huge, they're heavy, they're iron, they're *black*. And it was like, *wow*. When I think CIA, I think international trauma. . . .

"So I had to start thinking about how powerful art really is, in a context like that. And I had to conclude that the art isn't that powerful. I think art is generally decorative, even though I attempt to go beyond that. I think participating at the CIA would somehow imply my support for it. Context creates meaning. When you put art into a context like the CIA, it's intended to make the CIA more human, more cultural. They just wanted me to brighten up their day as they go to and from meetings. I'm no radical lefty. I don't go out and protest. But I don't want to be a part of the CIA. I read. I hear. It's frightening. I don't want to go *near* the place."

So he called Marilyn Farley back and kissed his bankroll goodbye. The CIA took a direct hit; the GSA panel hadn't even bothered to line up a second choice.

By contrast, the committee had no trouble finding an artist willing to handle the outdoor work. Jim Sanborn, a Washington sculptor, signed on immediately. He had no qualms about the sponsor. A few months ago, the Village Voice asked 24 artists whether they would do work for the CIA, and most of them stopped just short of gagging. Sanborn scoffs at that. "Well," he says, "they weren't offered something on this scale. It transforms you financially."

But it's not just the money, of course. "It's the [work] space itself that's important, not what the space means," says Sanborn, who toured the space on June 21. "A giant cube of space at the CIA is the same as a cube of space at Greenpeace. The CIA thinks it's doing good work, and that counts for something. Those people there, they ride the tide, like in any complex bureaucracy. Not everybody's bad. I was surprised by Matt's decision, as a fellow artist. But if you're confronted with this opportunity, you can stay on your high horse for only a few minutes before you've got to think about it another way."

"Look," says Mullican, "I know the place is going to look like a college. I know it's not going to be a place where everyone walks around dressed in black and wearing shades. But when you think CIA, you think about authority. And an artist is generally someone who fights authority, who doesn't enjoy bureaucracy. So this will be a problem for them. Even with this kind of money, they're going to have problems getting someone to do what I was picked for."

As for the GSA's appointed jurors, they have yet to convene for a post-Mullican meeting, to seek out an artist schooled in the art of *realpolitik*. Juror Jack Cowart insists, "The CIA is reality, just like the communist bloc is reality, and we already engage in diplomacy with communists. This CIA project should be viewed by artists as just another diplomatic exercise. There are a lot more facets to this than just 'liberals versus spooks.'"